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ABSTRACT

There are two crucial limitations in preparing graduate teaching assistants (TAs) for the composition classroom: the background they bring to teaching and the limited time available for training. Most TAs, although knowledgeable in literature, lack authority on the subject of composition instruction. An ideal TA would (1) have a masters degree; (2) be familiar with traditional grammatical terminology, the conventions of standard English, and linguistics; and (3) spend a semester with a "master" teacher well-trained in rhetoric and composition theory, making frequent preservice forays into composition classrooms. A university in the southwestern United States has a more pragmatic approach. A four-day pre-semester orientation acquaints TAs with organizational and administrative matters, classroom policies and procedures, overall course conduct and planning, and the evaluation and criticism of student writing. Training continues with a one-semester graduate seminar and workshop aimed specifically at developing the composition teaching potential of new TAs. They receive background information in rhetoric, linguistics, and composition theory, as well as other sources for information. They create stimulating writing assignments that enhance writing skills, then test them and discover criteria for grading the results by responding to their own and their colleagues' assignments. The department writing center also provides information and assistance for new TAs. (HTH)

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Freshman Composition: Developing Teaching Assistant Teaching Potential

Dorothy Margaret Guinn

My job, or part of my job, is to train teaching assistants to teach freshman composition. I did it on an informal basis at The University of Tulsa for several years (where I was gratified at attendance in non-credit, non-required late afternoon sessions about twice a month). I will do it at Arizona State University next year (where a TA training seminar is required for credit)--and for some years after that presumably. And I was a teaching assistant myself for several years at the University of Southern California. My experience, then, with teaching assistants is at large and small, public and private universities. Through these experiences I have concluded that ability to teach abounds though it is not by any means universal. I have also come to the conclusion that the central dilemna of developing the teaching potential of teaching assistants is how to prepare them to face the realities of the classroom within two crucial limitations: the background they bring to teaching and the limited time available for training. It is what I call training the troops while the battle is raging.

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The reason this frenetic situation exists is that English Departments, which train future teachers of reading and writing, typically train them in another field. The teaching assistants I see are knowledgeable all right, but their knowledge is of literature, most particularly its interpretation according to the latest critical theory. They are taught all too often, a la Ian Watt, that all that is needed to approach the difficult task of teaching writing is attentive reading of the finest literature. They are further taught that the only worthwhile writing is writing about literature that attempts to be "literature itself"--"in its own appropriately humble manner," of course. English majors assimilate the notion that teaching composition merely constitutes a brief visit to purgatory, a penance to be done before rising to the heaven of teaching literature.

With this background, the TAs' aims and desires often clash with those of their students. The TAs natural inclination is to focus on the product of the composing process and that only the finest aesthetic product, not the composing process itself. Furthermore, the writing they focus on is literary writing, not the mundane stuff of the rest of the world, especially, for our purposes, the world of freshman composition students, who have little instruction in the sophisticated reading of literature and little interest in writing PMLA papers about it. They, like me these days, prefer to take their literature straight.

In addition, many students lack basic writing skills and knowledge of the conventions of standard English even though they sit in a regular, not remedial, composition class. They often have done little writing but know that they need to learn to write clear functional prose for their majors in college and for business, industry, and law when they graduate. On the other hand, the TAs who teach them cherish the interesting metaphor and the startling image and disparage utlitarian prose as dull. And although they know something of the nuances of sophisticated literary style, they know little, at least consciously, of grammar, or the terminology to talk about it.

What the TAs lack is one of the most critical traits for successful teachers, authority in the subject matter they teach. The other trait is dedication. Without it, of course, nothing taught will take. But dedication cannot be taught. So I am taking dedication for granted now in order to talk about the knowledge TAs need to deal effectively with the students who walk in their classroom door. I categorize the knowledge they need into knowing <u>what</u> and knowing <u>how</u>, that is, knowledge of subject matter and knowledge of methodology.

I have a fantasy for my ideal TA. First of all he or she would have an M.A., an M.A. from one of the rhetoric and composition programs flourishing in the country. (In my fantasy, the programs are not Ph.D. programs only, which is

generally the case in reality.) My ideal TA would have studied in our program at ASU. Or Ross Winterowd's program at the University of Southern California. I have a built-in bias for these two programs since I teach in the former and had the good fortune to be one of the charter members in the latter. Like our hardy band of six at USC, a distinct minority in 1971 among the horde of budding literary specialists, my ideal TA would quickly become immersed in composition theory, and study linguistics, especially psycho- and socio-linguistics, soaking up the useful and fascinating research that has been done in language acquisition, dialects, and hemisphericity. My ideal TA would know traditional grammatical terminology, the conventions of standard English, and enough of linguistics to do more than mark a sentence like "When John bounces a check taxes his wife's patience" with awkward, or, in fact, mixed construction since "When John finds time to study remains a mystery" is clearly permissable. (Why the second is permissable and the first not has to do with when clauses as subjects appearing only before certain verbs used in the predicate. I haven't encountered any literature trained TAs who would know this or similar principles.)

My ideal TA would read the rhetoricians: Aristotle, certainly, and the moderns: Burke, Booth, Kinneavy, D'Angelo, and so on, and become aware of the application of rhetorical theory to the teaching of composition. That

would include understanding thoroughly the most basic of concepts that I found so enlightening when I came fresh from training in literature to the teaching of composition. One basic concept is that writing is a rhetorical act. I can still vividly recall Ross Winterowd, with Burke's Pentad as his starting point, emphasizing that any piece of writing involves an agent conveying some semantic purpose, through the agency of a structure, to an audience (even if that audience is only the self, as it often is at first), within a scene. The other basic concept is that the composing process involves four steps: pre-writing, writing, revising, and editing. I must, however, point out that I dislike calling them steps because that suggests linearity, when in fact the steps are cyclic, a continual going backward to move forward.

My ideal TA would then spend a semester with a master teacher, someone well-trained in rhetoric and composition theory, who would supervise frequent forays into composition classes before my TA would be assigned to teach classes on his or her own. Maybe this is what was intended when the title "teaching assistant" was coined. But Teaching assistants move into the classroom immediately, whether with a freshly minted B.A. or M.A. Any other system is too expensive. TAs go it alone, assisting only themselves and without the knowledge of my ideal TA to give them authority.

When I began training new TAs, I wanted them to become ideal TAs and I still do, but the time isn't available. Because reading and understanding rhetorical theory and something of linguistic theory underlie understanding the composing process, it seemed logical and necessary to start there. But it quickly became evident that in the real world, what is more important to new TAs is what to do in the classroom the first day, the first week, the first semester. Knowledge for short term survival takes precedance over knowledge for long term development. It also became evident, partly through new TAs' questions but mostly through classroom visitations, that many of new TAs do not fully understand the text they are teaching nor how to go about teaching it. Moreover a look at graded and marked papers reveals many TAs' inability to recognize or comment intelligently on problems in grammar, syntax, or mechanics, let alone organization and presentation of ideas. They sense the problems, but haven't the vocabulary to talk about them.

Therefore, my approach now has become intensely pragmatic, and in some respects one might even say simplistic. But it works better.

A practical orientation of some sort before the semester starts helps new TAs. A one-day or one morning program suffices in a pinch but only on the basis that anything is better than nothing. I plan a four-day

pre-semester orientation at Arizona State to acquaint TAs with four key areas: organizational and administrative matters, classroom policies and procedures, overall course conduct and planning, and the evaluation and criticism of student writing.

TAs meet key administrative personnel in the English Department and learn about its organization and committee structure and how it fits into the College of Arts and Sciences and the University as a whole. I review the responsibilities and duties of teaching assistants, trying to impress upon them the awesome burden they bear as representatives of the University teaching the one course that reaches more students than any other. They find out what classroom visitations are and their purpose, and that the designated members of the Freshman English Committee who visit are resource persons in addition to the Director of Freshman Composition. Many are past directors of freshman composition, and all have stake in the teaching of writing. The TAs learn about guidelines for attendance (their own as well as student--that is, when and how a TA goes about finding a substitute if illness strikes), how to handle student misconduct and mid-semester deficiency notices, the University's withdrawal policy, all sorts of matters that they need to know simply to function efficiently on the job. TAs eagerly absorb this knowledge of procedural matters, sensing that it will give them the appearance of

authority while their agile minds work to grasp the real thing.

While I do not believe that all TAs can or should move lockstep through the freshman composition course, I do believe that all sections should cover similar material and require similar amounts and types of writing. To this end and the other end of mapping the overall program of the course, I write master syllabi and a Freshman English Guide, which is purchased by the students. As it outlines what students can expect, it also outlines what is expected of instructors. We review both of these documents during orientation. The Director of the Writing Center talks about what the Center offers, how it operates, and how to determine who needs to attend. We have sessions on techniques for generating student participation and worthwhile in-class exercises, others on teaching methods and writing assignments, still others on the special problems of minority students, the use of visual aids, choosing a dictionary, and an overview of evaluating, grading, and commenting helpfully on student writing. Other faculty conduct some of these sessions, partly because the TAs will hear enough of the master's voice, but partly because the TAs then know others in the Department who are vitally interested in the freshman composition program and are eager to share their accumulated wisdom. I also invite four or five articulate second-year TAs to talk about their

beginning experiences, what they endured and how they survived. They entertain, to be sure, but they simultaneously quiet fears and boost morale. This panel, supplemented by a few more experienced TAs, becomes the nucleus of the Mentors, a group of experienced TAs who actively and regularly advise new TAs.

The orientation is, of course, only a start, a cram course in what to do Monday morning. Training continues with a one-semester graduate seminar and workshop aimed specifically at developing the teaching potential of new TAs. Some of what is covered in the pre-semester orientation is repeated and amplified during the course, especially the two basic concepts I mentioned earlier, teaching methods, evaluating student papers, and the like. Other topics are introduced too, all emerging from the central question: Will this knowledge help the TAs establish their ethos, their authority in the classroom?

As I said, my approach has become more direct, much simpler. These are a few of the things I do that work. I still draw in as much background material as TAs can handle in rhetoric, linguistics, and composition theory from a supplmentary teachers' source book, but I do so in the context of the material in the text we use for first semester freshman composition. I also direct the TAs to a wealth of other sources compiled into an annotated bibliography and the graduate seminars in rhetoric and

composition theory that are part of our degree program, but my method is essentially an elaborate explication of the text new TAs use, which at ASU is Frank D'Angelo's Process and Thought in Composition. If, for example, we are discussing the chapter on invention, I refer to the classical notion of invention and to Burke's Pentad, the research done in problem solving, particle/wave/field theory, and so on even though these do not appear overtly in the D'Angelo text; but concentration is chiefly on using inventional heuristics in class, say by taking in a reproduction of a modern painting and using various probes to elicit material on it. If we are working through the chapter on the sentence, Christensen's work and O'Hare's, for example, function as helpful supplements, but we spend time devising exercises and activities that put their theories into useful practice.

As much as possible, the TAs do not simply read, listen, and discuss. They do; they try things out. The TAs not only create writing assignments (after instruction and examples) that avoid plagiarism and enhance writing skills, they test them and discover criteria for grading the results the assignments produce by responding to their own and their colleagues assignments. We do the same sort of self-testing when we design classroom activities and examination questions. Because the examinations are a minor part of the course compared to the approximately twelve

papers students write in first semester composition, they are objective and weigh minimally in the final grade. They are intended mainly to encourage attendance and faithful reading of the text. TAs learn something new and useful for English majors: how to write good objective exam questions that will test the students' grasp of basic rhetorical and grammatical principles. In the process they also confirm for themselves the key principles they are teaching in the course. The questions they write contribute to a pool of questions from which all are free to choose, giving TAs needed time to read and evaluate papers and confer with students. We also generate and test classroom activities to see if they elicit the desired results, one of which is to involve as many students as possible. For example, we might try out a student evaluation of papers. This might involve a student reading his own paper, with other students specificially assigned to listen for the core statement, the main points, to choose a word from the writing which best summarizes it, and so on.

Since I well remember the awesome task of grading my first sets of papers, I not only schedule an introductory orientation session on grading but discuss criteria in the training seminar and conduct Group Grading sessions. Briefly, they work this way. Four or five papers submitted by the TAs are duplicated and sent out to all TAs and members of the Freshman English Committee with instructions

to grade and comment on them as they ordinarily would. When the papers are returned, I prepare a summary sheet showing the distribution of the grades and send it to everyone who will participate in the Group Grading. I establish a five member panel composed of one TA and four members of the Freshman English Committee, one of whom serves as moderator. Each panel member takes each paper in turn, announces the grade given, and discusses the paper's strengths and weaknesses that justify the grade. Since the TAs in the audience have read and graded the papers too, the panel and audience play off against each other in a lively discussion that encourages he more uniform grading and helpful comments.

We also spend time working up a list of possible questions to use during conferences, different sets for initial and subsequent conferences so that TAs have a guide for still another task at which they have no experience but with which they need to show authority.

A practice that helps TAs face the realities of the classroom but that is neither a function of an orientation or a training seminar is service in a Writing Center. Unfortunately, I cannot assign new TAs to the Writing Center at Arizona State as I could at The University of Tulsa. Budget restrictions are such that we have a minimally staffed Center, three tutors plus a half-time director. But at Tulsa, some new TAs fulfilled their entire first semester

assignment in the Writing Center. Others had a dual assignment, which was even more effective: one class balanced with equal time in the Writing Center. Whether a dual or single assignment, TAs became skilled at diagnosing writing problems and planning remedial work. Working on a one-to-one basis with students on their papers and supplementary exercises, inexperienced TAs became familiar with the kinds of problems students have, not only with basic skills but with understanding and responding to assignments, and understanding the instructor's marks and comments on their work. They also learned first hand the importance of close communication between instructors and tutors, a lesson not forgotten when they moved to the classroom.

This gives you an idea then of the sorts of things I do to develop TA teaching potential. The process is not engraved in stone. It is still evolving, and I expect it to continue to do so. After all, in what is a never ending task for a true professional, I am still developing my teaching potential.